

NON-VIOLENCE AND SACRIFICE

If there were a prize for the most threadbare topic in Indology, non-violence or *ahimsā* would be a likely candidate. Given its important, even central, place in Indian religions this is not surprising. Nevertheless, for all the attention it has received, *ahimsā* is still in need of explanation. Its origin and history remain largely conjectural and it may be a dubious enterprise to add a further conjecture. The enterprise becomes even more hazardous, if sacrifice is brought in as the origin of non-violence. Yet that is what the present paper is intended to do.

The justification for such an attempt is that the situation is an unusual one. It is not that non-violence and its main-stay, vegetarianism, are forcefully propounded as the universal norm in a society that certainly is not lacking in violence. Such conflicts of ideal norm and actual practice hardly call for surprise. The striking feature is that the conflict exists unresolved within the normative scriptural tradition itself. On the one hand there are the incontrovertible prescripts of Vedic ritual enjoining animal sacrifice; on the other hand the dharma scriptures in an equally strict fashion require *ahimsā*. Even if one would avoid animal sacrifice and limit the sacrifice to vegetal offerings, the authoritative brāhmaṇa texts leave no doubt that this involves killing. Not only the animal but equally the grains that are pounded and the soma stalks that are pressed are said to be killed¹. And so as to leave not even the shadow of a doubt the text uses here the straightforward verb *han-*, *ghnanti*, they kill. True, the sacrificed animal or vegetal life is then said to be reborn from the offering fire, but this rebirth requires a violent killing all the same. This should warn us against the pious fiction, often found in the texts, that killing for sacrificial purposes is no real killing and that the victim is promoted to a higher existence. For the texts are

1. Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 11.1.2.1 f.

at the same time perfectly explicit about the slaying². Whatever good it may eventually do to the victim, it still has to be killed. The embarrassing point is that this killing is enjoined precisely by the most hallowed part of the tradition, the śruti which is the source of all dharma.

Now one might consider — as Robert Lingat has aptly put it for all dharma³ — that the law of sacrifice is one that is « proposed », not « imposed ». Indeed, as far as the śrauta sacrifice is concerned, there is no binding obligation for the dvija, even if qualified, actually to perform it. Only when one has formally stated the intention to perform the sacrificial ritual, one is bound by its law to follow it out to the end. However, one can not get away so easily from sacrifice, for one has to accept the invitation to attend a sacrifice and then, whatever one's non-violent and vegetarian inhibitions, one must partake of the sacrificial food including meat, on pain of passing, as many years in hell as the hairs of the victim whose meat he has refused⁴. Curiously, this is the same penalty that, in the opposite case, awaits the meat-eater⁵. It may look, at first sight, as if Vedic sacrificial violence is securely sealed off from the universal norm of non-violence. But it emerges again from its secure niche to embarrass and compromise those who have rejected it. There is, then, an unresolved paradox at the heart of the dharma and this paradox is located right in its centre, in the hallowed śruti.

How should we interpret this contradictory situation? Our primary reaction is to analyse it in historical terms by arranging the incompatible prescripts along a chronological line. First there was meat-eating in and out of sacrifice provided the meat was from « kosher » animals, then came the rise of *ahimsā* driving meat-eating back and sealing it off within the confines of Vedic ritual and, finally, the triumph of *ahimsā* brought the norm of strict vegetarianism, thereby making sacrifice problematic. These three « layers » have been expertly disentangled by Ludwig Alsdorf⁶. However, this chronological layering does not tell us why and from where *ahimsā* and vegetarianism came. Alsdorf suggests that they may have originated in the Indus civilization⁷. But this is not going to help the explanation forward. It simply means that we push the problem out of sight, into the limbo of an as yet undeciphered past. The point is that it cannot be either denied or confirmed. But even

2. Thus, for instance, Manu 5.44 straightforwardly qualifies the sacrificial slaying of the victim as *himsā*, even though it is then declared that one should consider this as *ahimsā*. For the promotion to a higher existence see, e.g., Manu 5.40.

3. R. LINGAT, *Time and the Dharma*, in « Contributions to Indian Sociology », 6 (1962), p. 12.

4. Vāsiṣṭha 11.34; cf. Manu 5.35.

5. Manu 5.38.

6. L. ALSDORF, *Beiträge zur Geschichte von Vegetarismus und Rinderverehrung in Indien* (Abh. Ak. der Wiss. und der Lit., Geistes- und Sozialwiss. Klasse, 1961, nr. 6), Wiesbaden, 1962.

7. *Ibidem*, p. 53 f.

if the origin of *ahiṃsā*, or at least of vegetarianism, were ultimately to be found in India's pre-aryan past, we should still be saddled with our problem. For, as the finds of animal bones at the Indus sites indicate⁸, there would then have been a situation similar to the one that puzzles us in the dharma texts, namely the paradoxical juxtaposition of both normative meat-eating and its equally normative rejection. So whatever surprises the Indus civilization may still hold for us, we shall be well-advised to keep to the terra firma of the evidence that is open to us and certainly is not lacking in abundance.

In view of the conflicting norms of sacrificial violence and *ahiṃsā* it lies near at hand to look for their origin and rise outside brahmanical thought, that is: in the heterodox movements of Buddhism and Jainism. It is, however, one of the merits of Alsdorf's study that it clearly demonstrates that *ahiṃsā* was not a monopoly of Jains and Buddhists but, on the contrary, was a common Indian movement in which Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism equally shared⁹. This spares us the cumbersome conjectural history that supposes the over-clever brahmins to have saved their position by simply taking over the idea from their competitors in an « if-you-cannot-beat-them-join-them » move. But if we then assume an orthogenetic development that does not depend on heterodox sects or other external factors we shall have to look more closely into the brahmanic tradition, and especially into Vedic ritualism, for clues as to the origin and motives of the *ahiṃsā* doctrine. This is the line taken by Hanns-Peter Schmidt¹⁰. The present paper inscribes itself in the same line and tries to bring the argument a step further. Incidentally, it may then also be possible to disentangle non-violence from vegetarianism whose mutual identification easily makes us lose sight of their essential difference¹¹.

But first we should give attention to Schmidt's interesting reasoning. As he convincingly argues, the idea of *ahiṃsā* is strongly embedded in the ritualistic thought of the brāhmaṇa texts. Prevention or healing of every possible injury is one of the ritual's leading principles, as is already clear from the frequent statement that this or that is to be said or done *ahiṃsāyai*, to avoid injury.

8. As mentioned by H.-P. SCHMIDT, *The Origin of Ahiṃsā*, in « *Mélanges d'Indiologie à la mémoire de Louis Renou* », Paris, 1968, p. 627.

9. L. ALSDORF, *op. cit.*, p. 49. L. Dumont, however, discussing Alsdorf's contributions, still holds on to the idea of heterodox origins (*Homo Hierarchicus*, Paris, 1966, p. 191 f.). Part of the reason may be Dumont's view of the brahmin as a worldly priest and, therefore, at the opposite end from the renouncer (cf., however, J. C. HEESTERMAN, *Priesthood and the Brahmin*, in « *Contributions to Indian Sociology* », N.S. 5, pp. 43-7).

10. H.-P. SCHMIDT, *op. cit.* (above, n. 8), pp. 625-55.

11. For the difference of *ahiṃsā* and vegetarianism, see H.-P. SCHMIDT, *op. cit.*, p. 626, who suggests « that vegetarianism is either a special development of the *ahiṃsā*-doctrine or is grafted on it ».

Now it may be objected that not only Vedic sacrifice, but sacrifice in general the world over, evinces a deep-seated awe and fear before the wilful death and destruction that nonetheless are required by sacrifice. It would seem, however, that it is only in India that we find an overwhelming concern with the technical-ritualistic means to take away the sting of sacrificial death and to undo the injury. This concern makes itself strongly felt in the concept of the ritual mistake which, if not repaired by the prescribed *prāyaścitta*, cancels the whole ritual. It can be shown that this concept is linked with the pivotal gap or wound caused by sacrifice, namely the immolation of the victim¹². In other words, sacrificial death came to be treated as a « ritual mistake ». Against this background we may indeed speak, as Schmidt suggests¹³, of a « ritual theory of *ahimsā* ». In this way non-violence can be seen to arise from within Vedic ritual thought, without there being any need for external factors whether situated in the heterodoxies or in the grey past of pre-vedic civilization.

However, it is obvious that there is a large distance between this ritual *ahimsā* theory and the later doctrine. As Schmidt concedes, no less than a complete reversal is involved¹⁴. The position where violence is ritually prescribed and then repaired by equally ritual means has been turned round to the opposite doctrine which cuts short the whole ritual by simply rejecting all violence, ritual or otherwise. In an interesting development Schmidt explains this reversal in the context of the internalization of the sacrificial ritual which freed the sacrificer from his dependence on other beings but by the same token excluded all external acts including those that would repair the injury done and magically restore the victim to life. This then would have led to « the logical conclusion that injury to living beings had to be avoided altogether »¹⁵.

The reasoning certainly is seductive. It may, however, be asked whether the development did not start at the other end, with the rejection of the self-defeating violence and destructiveness of sacrifice, instead of resulting in it. Indications are indeed abounding that the originally violent pattern of sacrifice was replaced by a system of ritualism that minimized violence. Thus the victim is, in the śrauta ritual, no longer immolated at the sacrificial stake (*yūpa*) by decapitation but

12. On the « fault » of immolating the victim (by decapitation), cf. author, *Vrātya and Sacrifice*, in « Indo-Iranian Journal », 6 (1962), p. 23 f. Also: J. C. HEESTERMAN, *The Case of the Severed Head*, in « Wiener Zs. für die Kunde Süd- und Ostasiens », 11 (1967), pp. 22-43.

13. Cf. H.-P. SCHMIDT, *op. cit.*, p. 649.

14. *Ibidem*, p. 650.

15. *Ibidem*, p. 653.

outside the sacrificial area by suffocation without shedding its blood¹⁶. The obsessive concern about the still required ritual injury which is then again ritually undone, as we saw, equally seems to point to the impending collapse of violent sacrifice. I, therefore, propose to take up another line of explanation which equally starts from the development of Vedic ritual. To this end I shall take the argument further back than the ritual theory of *ahimsā*.

Quite independently from this theory, we find in the vedic ritual rules prescribing a strictly vegetarian diet. I am referring, of course, to the rules for the *dikṣita* as well as to the similar ones that concern the prospective śrauta sacrificer who is establishing his sacred fires (*agnyādheya*). As far as I know these special rules for the consecrated have not been considered in connection with *ahimsā* and vegetarianism. The reason for this is obvious. These rules are not absolute and permanent ones but only obtain temporarily during the preparatory period till the actual sacrifice — the Soma sacrifice or, in the case of the *agnyādheya*, the animal sacrifice¹⁷ —, when the rules are reversed and meat must indeed be eaten. What this suggests is a pattern of alternating phases: a vegetarian regime that is reversed at the time of sacrifice into a meat-eating one.

A brief look at the *dikṣā* rules may illustrate this pattern. The *dikṣita* should have no honey and no meat, nor should he have sexual intercourse. Equally there are rules for his speech, especially in addressing people, and, above all, he should speak the truth. Moreover, he does not give nor does he cook food and, consequently, he neither offers sacrifice. On the other hand, his behaviour should be proudly superior, for he does not get up to salute anybody, not even the king, his preceptor or his father-in-law as he would normally be obliged to do¹⁸. Finally he is even proclaimed a *brāhmaṇa*¹⁹. All this lasts till the day of sacrifice, when the reversal takes place and the sacrificer empties himself of his accumulated power in gifts (*dakṣiṇa*) and sacrificial offerings. Significantly, the end of the *dikṣā* period is marked by the disposal of the antelope horn — which the *dikṣita* has all the time carried with him — at the time of the *dakṣiṇa* distribution²⁰. Although the standard ritual paradigm allows for a minimum of four days, the *dikṣā* does not seem to be a short ritual preparation before entering

16. For the change from warrior sacrifice to brahmanic ritualism, cf. J. C. HEESTERMAN, *Vedisches Opfer und Transzendenz*, in G. R. F. Oberhammer (Hsgr.), *Transzendenz Erfahrung*, Vienna, 1978, pp. 29-44; also: *Householder and Wanderer*, in T. N. Madan, *Way of Life*, New Delhi, 1982.

17. For the animal sacrifice, which must follow the *ādhāna* and the first vegetal sacrifice within a year or half a year, see Āpastamba Śrautasūtra 5.25.19-20, cf. 7.28.6, 8.

18. Cf. W. CALAND-V. HENRY, *L'Agniśtoma*, no. 19 (pp. 20-22).

19. *Ibidem*, no. 18 (p. 20).

20. Āpastamba Śrautasūtra 10.13.3, 13.7.16; cf. CALAND-HENRY, *op. cit.*, no. 192 (p. 297).

upon the sacred work of sacrifice. Periods of up to a year are equally mentioned²¹, suggesting a full time cycle in its own right rather than just a few preparatory days.

This is even clearer in the case of the *agnyādheya*. Like the *dīkṣita* the prospective sacrificer is bathed, his hair, beard and nails are cut and he is clothed in special garments²². The rules for his conduct, though less detailed, equally forbid meat and sex. Here, too, a duration of a year's time is mentioned²³, preceding the actual installation of the *śrauta* fires (*ādhāna*) and the first vegetal sacrifice. Only after the animal sacrifice (which must follow within a year) he is allowed to eat meat again. Then, after another year, the sacrificer may start on a new cycle with the repeated installation of the fires (*punarādheya*), involving again an interdict period and its reversal at the renewal of the fires and sacrifice. Though the *punarādheya* is given as an option in case the sacrificer does not feel satisfied, the fact that no specific reasons for such a feeling are given looks suspicious. Rather it would seem that the original pattern still shines through. The *agnyādheya* is not a once-for-all event but an endless succession of cyclically alternating phases revolving round the pivotal point of sacrifice²⁴.

But what is the point of all these complicated alternations and reversals? Here another feature of the *dīkṣā* makes itself felt. The *dīkṣita* is not a harmless figure preparing himself for the peaceful work of the sacred rites, as the classical ritual makes him out to be. Originally he was a proud and aggressive warrior. This still comes out in the rules for the *dīkṣita*'s travel. For that purpose he should set out on a chariot as indeed a warrior does; or, failing that, he should at least take a part of a chariot (*rathāṅga*) with him²⁵. But what is the purpose of this heroic display? In fact the ritual, as the texts present it, does not call for any warrior exploit and they seem at a loss to explain why the *dīkṣita* should travel at all. The original reason, however, is clear enough. The *dīkṣita* should set out to win the booty, especially cattle, that he is to spend in sacrifice. Although this requirement is reduced to an innocuous begging tour (*saniyācana*)²⁶, these appearances can not deceive us. Here the *dīkṣita* still shows himself to have been a consecrated warrior related to, if not identical with the ancient aggressive *vrātya* who was not without difficulty assimilated to the classical ritual.

To this warrior aspect still another element should be added, namely transhumance. Shortly after the monsoon harvest the cattle has to be

21. Āpastamba Śrautasūtra 10.14.8.

22. *Ibidem*, 5.4.9.

23. *Ibidem*, 5.7.7.

24. Cf. J. C. HEESTERMAN, *Other Folk's Fire*, in J. F. STAAL, *Agni* (forthcoming).

25. Āpastamba Śrautasūtra 10.19.6-7; Mānava Śrautasūtra 2.1.3.15.

26. Cf. CALAND-HENRY, *op. cit.*, no. 23 (p. 25 f.); on the similarity of *Vrātya* and *dīkṣita* cf. J. C. HEESTERMAN, *Vrātya and Sacrifice*, in «Indo-Ir. Journ.», 6 (1962), pp. 11-15.

moved out to fresh grazing grounds. The ritual texts still preserve this in the curious yātsattras in which groups of *dikṣitas* move their place of sacrifice — or rather their camp — along a predetermined circuit. The purpose of this laborious expedition becomes clear, when we learn that one of the occasions for ending the yātsattra is, when they have managed tenfold to increase their herd of cattle, or, conversely, when they have lost all²⁷. The yātsattra, in other words, preserves in harmless form the transhuming and raiding trek of the consecrated warriors fighting for pastures and cattle²⁸.

Against this background the meaning of cyclical alternation and reversal becomes clear. It is the pattern of the two opposite phases of the year, the peaceful agricultural season of life in the community as against the violent raiding and transhuming season where the warrior comes into his own. Here we may also observe not so much the difference as the original opposition of vegetarianism and non-violence. The trekking warrior is obviously violent, but as we saw he is equally vegetarian. There is no contradiction here. The warrior engaged in transhumance should guard his cattle, on occasion conquer cattle, so as to increase his herd. But for the same reason he is precluded from killing cattle and eating their meat. Only when he has come through the dangers of loss and death, he can triumphantly celebrate the meatconsuming sacrifice and revert to a peaceful but carnivorous regime.

The sacrifice not only meant the return to the peaceful phase. It was itself the apogee of the warrior's violent way of life. Violence was not only in the immolation of cattle. The immolation was itself the centre of violent agonistic procedures that have left their unmistakable traces in the many ritualized contests — chariot races, shooting matches or *brahmodyas*. The place of sacrifice is in other words a battle ground, just as the Kurukṣetra of the internecine Bhārata war was the *devayajana* of the gods. However peaceful and harmless the śrauta ritual may look, there can be no doubt about its violent origin in the heroic battle sacrifice epitomizing the warrior phase. Over the whole of the orderly and obsessively regulated vedic ritual there still hangs the dark cloud of a heroically violent world where gods and asuras are for ever fighting each other in endlessly recurring rounds of conflict.

It would seem that it was the self-defeating violence of the pre-classical agonistic sacrifice that led to a radical reversal. But this time it was no longer a reversal of alternating opposite phases but an abso-

27. Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa 25.10.19-21.

28. On these treks cf. W. RAU, *Staat und Gesellschaft im alten Indien*, Wiesbaden, 1957, p. 51 f.; J. C. HEESTERMAN, *Householder and Wanderer*, in T. N. Madan, *Way of Life* (Fs. Louis Dumont), New Delhi, 1982, pp. 251-71. It seems pertinent that a *brahmacārin*, Satyakāma Jābāla, is sent out by his preceptor with a herd of a four hundred underfed cows and promises to have them multiply to a thousand; while trekking he obtains the knowledge of *brahman* and on his return with the thousand cows he « shines as a knower of *brahman* » (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 4.4.5, 9.2).

lute and irreversible break. The unending cycle of sacrificial violence, death and destruction was broken and the tension between the alternating phases collapsed. This was achieved — and an achievement it certainly was — by excluding the other, rival party from the place of sacrifice which now instead of a battle field became the orderly and conflictless ritual emplacement. But this equally meant that the Veda and its ritual were divorced from society and set apart in a transcendent world of their own. That, in short, is the way in which the heroic world of sacrifice collapsed. The turning point was replaced by the clear break between an unreformed but devalorized social world and the only valid but extra-social world of the single, unopposed sacrificer.

The lived-in social world of scarcity could not but continue its periodic rounds of conflict and violence, albeit now without the ultimate legitimation that the warrior's sacrifice had provided. The ritual, on the other hand, held up the ideal of total order and peace in a separate world of its own. In this ritual universe that no longer recognized the alternation of opposite phases the consecrated warrior was turned into the inoffensive *dīkṣita*, who should at the same time be the perfectly peaceful householder (*grhastha*) of the originally opposite phase. The vegetarian rule, therefore, came to bind not only the *dīkṣita* but the appeased householder as well. In fact, the first requirement for becoming a *dīkṣita* and sacrificer is being a married householder. In this way, we can understand how the merger of *ahimsā* and vegetarianism came about, as also that the combined rule became a universal one binding both the worldly householder and the other-worldly renouncer.

This makes it all the more likely that the typical fusion of *ahimsā* and vegetarianism arose from brahmanic ritual thought, while Buddhists and Jains, though stressing non-violence, originally had no particular use for vegetarianism²⁹. But if we can see in the *dīkṣita* and sacrificer the prefiguration of the otherworldly value of *ahimsā*-cum-vegetarianism, there still is the fact that the vedic ritual upholds and sanctifies animal sacrifice. However marginalized and bloodless the actual immolation may have been made, and however much it may have been hedged in by the « ritual *ahimsā* theory », it remained a killing all the same. The unresolved tension led to an irreversible bifurcation that pitted the world renouncer against the worldly householder and sacrificer. The *sannyāsin* can easily be seen to continue the conduct of the *dīkṣita* in a perpetual fashion without ever reaching the turning point of sacrifice³⁰. The clear-cut and absolute opposition between the worldly and

29. Cf. L. ALSDORF, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-16. Since all food — whether animal or vegetal — is « killed » when it is prepared for consumption, « the essential criterion was that it should not have been specifically prepared for the monk » (Alsdorf, p. 7; cf. also my review in « Indo-Ir. Journ. », 9, 1966, pp. 147-49).

30. On the similarity of *dīkṣita*, *brahmacārin* and *sannyāsin* cf. H.-P. SCHMIDT, *op. cit.*, p. 651.

the sannyāsic modes of life created, however, its own irresolvable problem. As against this absolute break the Veda and its ritual maintained the unresolved tension of the paradox.

Perhaps it is precisely in this unresolved paradox that the pivotal and enduring importance of the Veda and its ritual are situated. The point is that Vedic ritual, though desocialized and set apart in its own transcendent sphere, still recognizes and assigns a place, albeit a reduced and strictly controlled one, to mundane interest, conflict and violence. This paradoxical double orientation may well be decisive. Even if not practised, the Veda is there, in its full scriptural authority, to hold out to man the promise of access to transcendence without demanding him to break away from his own world.

In this way we can perhaps understand that the Veda is central to the dharma, but equally that it is there as a sign of contradiction. At the heart of the dharma that propounds *ahiṃsā* the Veda holds on to sacrifice. It would be unsatisfactory to view this as a meaningless survival. Invested with the transcendent authority of the vedic injunction sacrifice defies human order and logic. The transcendent contradicts and breaks open all order. For the same reason the ideal and universal order of dharma must acknowledge and admit to its centre its own contradiction.

Leiden.